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ABSTRACT

Negative connotations of large scale intercollegiate athletic competition are analyzed and a case is presented in defense of such programs. Discussion is conducted on rewards for college athletes in terms of educational attainment, personal satisfaction, and possible upward social mobility. The consequences of large scale athletic programs to the institutions which conduct them are discussed in terms of cost effectiveness, visibility to the public, and the maintenance of traditions. (JD)

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# In Support of Large Scale Collegiate Athletics

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"Big Time College Athletics: Sociological Perspectives"

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## Abstract

Negative connotations of the term "big time" suggests a substitution of the term "large scale" in order to perserve objectivity when used as a descriptor of collegiate athletics. Personal values to the athlete for participation in large scale athletics are conveyed with the reminder that the experience is justifiable on such bases alone. The consequences of large scale athletics involvement in terms of educational attainment, role conflict, and social mobility have yet to be determined by research which a) measures change in relevant outcomes from pre-collegiate participation to post-collegiate participation, b) isolates changes attributable to athletic involvement from those of the natural maturation process, and (c) measures long term effects. The consequences of large scale athletic programs to the institutions which conduct them are discussed in terms of cost effectiveness, visibility to the public, and the maintenance of traditions.

Before launching into the text of my presentation, I must ask your indulgence of a specific request. The term "big time" is easily associated with "big time operators," "big time politicians," and "big time gamblers," all of which are anathema to public concerns. For objectivity, therefore, I will substitute the term "large scale," which appropriately fits the operational definition of "big time" in terms of budget and resources, but avoids such negative connotations.

It is my purpose, as a speaker supportive of large scale athletics, to elucidate some of its benefits to athletes and their institutions. What, then, does large scale athletic programs of today offer athletes?

First, there is the intrinsic satisfaction brought about by head of head competition against high level contemporary athletes in a cooperative, interacting setting. At earlier levels of competition such as youth leagues and secondary schools this intrinsic satsifaction was called fun or joy. Not to belittle this factor, I maintain that most large scale collegiate athletes still have fun and enjoy competition.

Next, there are social rewards available for specific athletic merits. All-star recognition, statistical leadership and symbolic tokens, e.g., trophies, letter awards help inspire athletic participation in large scale athletics. Admittedly extrinsic, these awards have social reinforcing value nonetheless.

Finally, large scale athletics offers the opportunity to develop and/or hone one's specific athletic skills under some of the most renowned teachers and coaches available. Perhaps the greatest personal benefit of large scale athletics is the pursuit of excellence in such unique circumstances.

## Consequences for Athletes

### Athletics and Academics

"We cannot justify intercollegiate athletics on any rational basis other than their value for participants" (Homer Babbidge, Past President of the University of Connecticut, cited in Coakley, 1978, p. 157).

If large scale athletics has an achilles heel, at the moment it is located in the notions about academic achievement of athletes. However, so little is really known about the complexity of this aspect, and so much is misunderstood.

Large scale athletics offers the opportunity for an education, but no guarantees. Parenthetically, do you know of any program which does guarantee an "education?" Yet in a direct, but informal sense the athletic experience itself offers concommitant lessons deemed appropriate for developing discipline and leadership. Military service academies believe so strongly in the value of the athletic experience that participation in at least one sport, varsity, club or intramural is required each year. This requirement is maintained even

though the academies' large scale competitive successes for the past several years have been modest indeed. Few other colleges are willing to require all students to participate in the program.

Instead, most universities are content to refer to its representatives as "student athletes." Such a term implies an apparent relationship which has yet to be supported empirically. In the absence of conclusive evidence, let me offer a statement which I believe best illustrates the relationship:

An athlete will be a student if he/she wants to be, given skills to do so. And conversely, a student will be an athlete if he/she wants to be, given the skills to do so.

Despite vehement claims to the contrary, there is no empirical evidence to conclude that participation in intercollegiate athletics precludes, enhances, or interfers with the athletes' academic achievement or lack thereof. The determination of the impact of the large scale athletic experience upon academic attainment is extremely difficult to obtain. The study of the impact of the college experience in general by Alexander Astin (1978) provides, with only slight modifications, the following useful guidelines for studying the impact of the large scale athletic experience upon the individual athlete.

(1) Multi-institutional data, that is, data collected simultaneously from students and athletes from the various types of institutions who engage in large scale athletics.

(2) Longitudinal data, that is, information on the ways in which collegiate athletes change between admission to athletic programs and some subsequent point in time. I recommend strongly that the point in time be extended beyond the date of last formal competition, preferably as far as reasonably possible beyond completion of elgibility, eventual graduation, into profession and career.

(3) Multiple measures of an athlete's entering student characteristics, e.g. standardized test scores, high school curricula, grades and class ranks; SES, race, sex and academic goals.

(4) Multiple follow-up measures of student development of athletes including both cognitive (grades, degrees, retention, test scores, class ranks and honors) and affective (attitudes, towards participation and involvement) outcomes. One of the most serious obstacles to researching this relationship is agreement concerning relevant outcomes.

(5) Multi-variate designs for controlling differences among athletes entering institutions in different competitive levels. Do large scale college athletes differ from small scale college athletes because of attributional factors which influence athletes to select large or small scale programs, or are

differences due to factors inherent in the particular institutional experience?

(6) Methodological provisions should be made for separating athletic participation effects from maturational effects or the simple process of growing up. For example, does an 18 year old freshman football player in a large scale program leave school because of the demands of football participation or academic demands, or homesickness, lovesickness, inability to acclimate to heat, humidity, smog, the city, the country or financial or domestic crisis back home or, is he simply running from selective service?

No study that I am aware of adequately isolates changes (cognitive or affective) which result form large scale athletic involvement from those attributable to other sources.

Instead academic attainment of athletes are typically topics of doctoral dissertation studies which are descriptive in nature, dealing with local or intra-institutional phenomena but which re-surface from time to time in the text of some statement supporting or condemning collegiate athletics.

Only one study that I am aware of attempts to isolate cognitive and affective changes resulting from the athletic experience, from changes attributable to other resources. Hanks and Eckland (1976), notable sociologist of high education attempted to determine such effects upon educational attainment

as part of a broader study of extra-curricular involvement. Multiple regression models were developed which allowed them to consider such attributional factors as socio-economic status, standardized test scores, high school curricula and grades, social and academic honors. They tapped into a national sample of youth who were high school sophomores in 1955 and conducted a follow-up study in 1970--a span of 15 years. Thus, they were able to consider not only college academic grades, retention and ultimate graduation as relevant outcomes but also graduate school, professional schools and vocational achievements. For their efforts, Hanks and Eckland concluded that collegiate varsity sports were not detrimental for athletes in terms of grade performance or attrition. "Actually, athletics has a slight positive effect on keeping students in college and even on going to graduate school." (p.290)

Much has been discussed recently about the possibility of the separate roles of student and athlete being so incongruous, so incompatible that they might be mutually exclusive. This thesis almost always follows a revelation of poor academic performance on the part of athletes, as if to offer an explanation of such phenomena.

The different demands of each role upon the individual are obvious. Picking up the third receiver to the strong side of the formation on dropback pass for the middle linebacker is about as far removed as he can get from picking up

an "A" on a term paper. Yet, are there not parallels to both challenges? Is not each a pursuit of excellence? Do not each contain reinforcement for merit?... for personal initiative? Therefore, could there not be, at least on a intuitive basis, reason to expect some congruency in the nature of each challenge? My point is that reconciliation of possible role conflicts is faced by every student whether he/she is an athlete, a student council president, or a convenience store clerk.

Earlier I argued that we really do not know the impact of athletics upon academics and vice versa. It seems to me that unless or until there is evidence that achievement in one precludes or denies achievement in the other then the notion of irreconcilable role conflict is without substance.

Social Mobility

Each of us present today is familiar with the claim that collegiate athletics offers an opportunity for raising one's socio-economic status. Having attained my first degree while on athletic scholarship I would offer myself as an example. Like many before me and many after me, I "earned" my way through a Bachelor's degree by competing in football. I needed the financial assistance which football provided. The high school seniors of 1959 had fewer means of financial assistance than the seniors of 1980. Thus, indirectly the pattern of competing in athletics in exchange for an educational opportunity yielded a degree which would enable me to move up the ladder of social mobility.

Today this pattern for upward social mobility is still available but frankly, it is less necessary. With the plethora of academic scholarships, government loans, government grants, and work study programs in combination with more open (less selective) admissions policies available today who needs an athletic scholarship to survive the system?

Who? The person for whom athletic scholarship has special meaning, that's who. The person who wants those personal experiences I mentioned in the introduction. The person who chooses the athletic scholarship over alternative means.

Research dealing with the effect of upward mobility via collegiate athletic experience suffers the same inadequacies as that dealing with the relationship of athletic involvement to academic attainment. In essence, the research does not measure the specific impact of the athletic experience upon retention towards a degree, or toward occupational preparation.

Let's look at social mobility through athletics from a more direct perspective. Suppose you are a vibrant young male who aspires to a career in professional football or basketball. Let's ignore for a moment Edwards (1973) dire predictions of your probability of reaching that pinnacle. The fact remains that college athletics is exclusive intermediate training and proving grounds between high school athletics and the pros. This is it! You have no choice but to participate or abandon your goal. That you must attend college in order to compete means that you must matriculate for the time necessary to gain

Personally, I find this arrangement regrettable. Non-students (Players without academic entry skills) are drawn into an academic setting with extremely low probabilities of academic achievement. That most or many do not complete degrees in four to five years has been widely documented. (that they do not graduate in a longer period of time has not been documented.) But alas, some players drafted into an academic setting re-structure their priorities, work at remediating academic skills deficits and yes, incredibly . . . graduate. While coaching football at North Texas State University in 1970 I discovered 13 of our players had serious reading deficiencies. Tutoring, remedial programs, counseling and the like were successful for two of that group who eventually graduated. There were no miracles, just hard work. I have no data however to indicate on a national basis percentages of those athletes with academic deficiencies who came to play and stayed to graduate. Such research is necessary.

## Consequences For Institutions

What does a university derive from a large scale athletic program? Coakley (1978) lists that benefits most often ascribed by proponents of athletic programs as (a) general publicity, (b) visibility, especially for keeping the univeristy in the consciousness of sources for funding, and (3) the maintenance of spirit and tradition.

Publicity

That athletic programs are the most effective and far-reaching sources of advertising and publicity for many universities needs no elaboration. It is ironic however, that a university's non-athletic accomplishments do not enjoy the same accessibility to public attention. More than ironic, other departments within the university may become resentful towards athletic departments. Yet for whatever inequities exist, it is not the fault of the athletic department but a difference in public appeal. James Michener, noted author, explains (1976) that the lure of large scale athletics to the general public, alumni, and students is so great the universities have an obligation to entertain these constituents.

There are those who disagree with Michener's contention that entertainment is and always has been a basic principle of athletics. There are those of us too, who decry athletics for so mundane a purpose, yet would not dare miss a broadcast of a tournament or bowl.

Whether or not the notoriety of athletics are functional for procuring alumni donations and endowments is difficult to ascertain. My inclination is that the degree to which this is true is a function of local, state and institutional contingencies.

Cost Effectiveness

Much has been said about the expense of conducting a large scale program. Expense to whom? Most athletic departments are classified as "auxiliary enterprises" within the scheme of overall university operations (Raiborn, 1978), which means any expansion of intercollegiate athletics must be financed by revenues generated by athletics or sources other than the normal operating budget of the university.

Despite the findings of Raiborn (1978) that financial statuses of large scale athletic programs have remained stable from 1970 to 1977, I keep hearing criticisms of the athletic budgets being too large and "costing too much." I could sympathize with these criticisms if someone would show me where any athletic endeavor is conducted at the expense of an academic endeavor at that university. In some cases, the reverse may be true. Although I consider Stanford University's athletic program to be somewhat unique, it nevertheless underwrites a comprehensive intramural sports and recreation program for the entire university community and their families. Indeed, Stanford must average 60,000 in attendance at each home football game for such expenses to be met.

Critics have also attached the relative expenditures (without regard to the source) to educate an athlete as

compared to a regular student. But I would like to see a dollar for dollar comparison of the costs of educating athletes and various non-athlete samples of the student population such as those on other types of grants, assistantships, loans, and work study programs. The analysis should include the source of payments. Then I would ask whose education is more costly to whom?

Visibility

The image of an institution can be seriously damaged by scandals such as that currently being experienced by the University of New Mexico. University of New Mexico President William E. Davis noted that athletics are particularly vulnerable to corruption because of the ease by which any individual can violate the honor codes on which a complex institution of high learning is based. The NCAA is not governed by legal sanctions but administrative ones. Violations are not criminal in the eyes of the NCAA but rather violate the agreements that a university accepts with membership. Institutions do not violate NCAA principles, individuals do. As of this writing, three members of the athletic staff at U.N.M. have been implicated as responsible for the violations. Only time will tell the severity of detriment to a university of 20,000 students, 400 athletes, 1,000 faculty and 80 athletic staff as a result of the devious behavior of those three.

Despite public outrage from both within and outside the university and editorially from the press, large scale athletics still survive at UNM.

Perhaps it survives because an informed public realizes that the damage was perpetrated by so few, and that the overwhelming majority of athletes and coaches function honorably in the pursuit of excellence.

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